Tribal Migration In India and Beyond

THE WORLD OF THE RURAL LABOURER IN COLONIAL INDIA

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Chapter Six

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INTRODUCTION

Despite much research, and continuing debate, there remains a widespread dissatisfaction with existing characterizations of modes of production in peripheral social formations, such as India. This dissatisfaction extends as much to the pre-colonial period as it does to the colonial. Conceptual inadequacies mean that we will still have but a very hazy notion of how India was incorporated within the wider networks of appropriation and exchange which typify the modern world economy, and to the extent that these processes have not been adequately understood our conceptualization of the nature of contemporary capitalism itself remains confused.

Historians have criticized the commonly accepted notions of 'feudalism' and 'semi-feudalism' in India with particular force.[1] Crude

The Records of the Government of the Central Provinces of India were consulted in the Madhya Pradesh Central Record Office in Nagpur and in the Central Secretariat in Bhopal, India, by Crispin Bates, and the Records of the Department of Immigration were consulted in Mauritius by Marina Carter. These archives are referred to as MPPCRO, BP, and MA respectively. IOR refers to the India Office Records in London, PRO to the British Public Records Office in Kew, and BP stands for Bhopal Secretariat.

[1] For the notion of semi-feudalism, see A. Bhaduri, 'Agricultural Backwardness and Semi-feudalism', *Economic Journal*, (March 1973); Pradhan H. Prasad, 'Semi-feudalism: the Basic Constraints of Indian Agriculture', in A.N. Das & V. Nilakant (eds), *Agrarian Relations in India*, Delhi: Manohar, 1979; G. Omvedt, 'Migration in Colonial India: the Articulation of Feudalism and Capitalism by the Colonial State', *Journal of Peasant Studies* (*JPS*), 7, 2; and G. Standing, 'Migration and Modes of Exploitation: Social Orgins of Immobility and Mobility', *JPS* 8, 2, pp. 182-5ff. An application of the semi-feudal' model

technological and ecological determinisms have been debunked and land scarcity is no longer seen as a primary determinant of the medieval social order. New emphasis is being placed instead on the role of the State, in the broad sense, and of local political authorities such as tribes, peasant communities and extended family lineages. The picture increasingly emerging is one of low population densities and a surprising level of abundance in areas of the pre-colonial economy, with the ebb and flow of political power being the principal origin of economic and technical progress (as well as decline).[2] In the process ouR understanding of the Indian economy has become highly disaggregated, with markedly divergent patterns of settlement, production and economic change being identified regionally, within regions, between plateau areas, forests and plains, and even within single districts.[3]

Correspondingly, historical analysis of the development of capitalism in the subcontinent is steadily shifting away from voluntaristic explanations, such as the growth of markets, communications and trade (which are often to be found in one form or another in earlier periods), and a re-emphasis of the coercive, as well as hegemonic, nature of the colonial state and the relations of production.[4] The critique of voluntarist explanations has also led to further deconstruction of peasant rationality, the rejection of the concepts of both 'moral' and 'market' economy, and a call for far more specific (though not necessarily wholly autonomous or discursive exploitations of culture, ideology and ideologies of production.[5]

Of all its functions, perhaps the most important role of the colonial state was in the mobilization, or rather 'immobilizing', of Indian labour.[6] Indigenous capital was comparatively easily tapped and grants of vast tracts of land to *mahajan*-landlords, rich peasants or European planters to promote the production of commercial crops could be arranged with little effort. Tax cuts, tariffs, subsidies and government works then ensured a concentration of the production of these commodities in areas in the Punjab, Assam, central India and the islands of the Indian ocean that, before the late eighteenth century, had been little more than forest or semi-desert. But in all these places the provision of labour, at the right price, was the most difficult thing to ensure. To achieve this end labour had to be, not freed, but directed, and in

to tribal society is to be found in S.K. Saha, 'The Territorial Dimension of India's Tribal Problem', in M. Shepperdson and C. Simmons (eds), *The Indian National Congress and the Political Economy of India, 1885-1985*, (Aldershot, Gower Press). For the critique, see H. Mukhia & T.J. Byres (eds), *Feudalism and Non- European Societies*, (London, Frank Cass), 1886, and P.B. Mayer, 'South India, North India: the Capitalist Transformation of Two Provincial Districts' in H. Alavi *et al*, *Capitalism and Colonial Production*, (London, Croom Helm, 1982), 77-118.

[2] Cf. C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*, (Cambridge, 1983); H. Mukhia & T.J. Byres, *op. cit.*, and B. Stein, 'State Formation and Economy Reconsidered', *Modern Asian Studies*, 19, 3, (Cambridge, 1985).

[3] C.J. Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy, 1880-1954: the Tamilnad Countryside*, (Oxford, 1984); C. Bates, 'Regional Dependence and Rural Development in Central India', Cambridge Ph.D. thesis (1984); S. Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, 1985; and D. Ludden, *Peasant History in South India*, (California, 1986).

[4] The *locus classicus* of voluntaristic historiography is the spread of the railway, and the logically deduced consequences that flowed from this 'growth of opportunity'. For variations on this theme see M.B. McAlpin, *Subject to Famine: Food Crises and Economic Change in Western India, 1860-1900*, (California, 1983); and John Hurd II, 'Railways and the Expansion of Markets in India, 1861-1921, *Explorations in Economic History*, 12 (July 1975), 263-88. On the coercive role of the state, see D. Arnold, *Police Power and Colonial Rule in South India*, (Delhi, OUP, 1986); and D.A. Washbrook, 'Law, State and Society in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 15, 3. This re-emphasis on the role of the state has been an established trend in neo-Marxist writing for some time—see for example, P. Corrigan, H. Ramsay and D. Sayer, 'The State as a Relation of Production' in P. Corrigan (ed.), *Capitalism, State Formation and Marxist Theory*, (London, 1980). More controversial is Corrigan and Sayer's *The Great Arch: British State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford, 1985), and the now extensive *opus* of Immanuel Wallerstein, which carries this approach to often unsustainable levels of generality. Greater success has been achieved by G. Kitching's *Class and Economic Change in Kenya* (Yale, 1980), a study in the political economy of development, which became the model for a number of subsequent studies in African economic and social history.

[5] P. Chatterjee, 'Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal' in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I*, (Delhi, OUP, 1982); R.G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making*, (California, 1985); F. Perlin, 'Material Life and Culture in Pre-colonial India', (South Asia seminar, Univ. of Pennsylvania, 28 Sept. 1986), and D.A. Washbrook, 'Moral Economy versus Market Economy in the Interpretation of 18th Century South Indian History', (SOAS South Asia seminar, London, June, 1987). More recently there have been published N. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown* (Cambridge, 1988), D. Chakraborty, *Re-thinking Working-Class History* (Delhi, OUP, 1989), G. Prakash, *Bonded Histories* (Cambridge, 1990), and A. Yang, *The Limited Raj* (California, 1989), all of which critique conventional theories of the colonial and pre-colonial state, and the role of 'capitalist' and 'proletarian' ideologies of production in the popular 'mentalities' of colonial India. These developments in historical writing have been strongly influenced by recent epistemological trends in anthropology which have re-emphasized culture, historical process and 'practical reason' over structural and economic determinations.

[6] This is not a mere dialectical flourish but is a point that has been strongly argued, using south Indian evidence, by Washbrook in 'Moral Economy versus Market Economy' *op. cit.* See also C. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp. 219-55.

promoting this the interventions of the colonial state were as important for the number of economic activities, and opportunities, that they effectively proscribed, as they were for those that they encouraged.

In the Central Provinces of India the grant of 'malguzari' (or landlord) rights in 1862 to the mahajan-moneylenders of the former Maratha regime was described as a 'gift' to the capitalist classes worth hundreds of crores of rupees, and it was supported by an across the board cut in the land tax in the Narmada valley (where the policy originated) of approximately one-third. Similar terms were used to describe proprietary settlements of the land in other parts of India. In Bengal and Assam, thousands of acres of land were sold off to European planters at concessional rates, huge amounts of money were advanced to indigo planters, and tariffs were imposed on rival indigo producers in Agra and Oudh to ensure a market for the new plantations. Coffee planters in Sri Lanka were similarly favoured, as were the early sugar planters of the 1820s in Bihar, Fiji and Mauritius, whilst opium was established as a government monopoly and government money invested directly in its production in Malwa, Bundelkhand, and adjacent territories.[7] However, in all these cases the colonial authorities recognized the problem of a supply of cheap labour, both within India and on an international scale, to be the key to the growth of commodity production, and colonial settlement and emigration policies were formulated essentially with this in mind.

The ramifications of this went far beyond the terrain conventionally covered by the debate on 'deindustrialization', and included the dissolution of entire economies that were nomadic or forest-based, the expulsion of whole communities from the land in more backward areas, the conversion of land into a scarce commodity, and a growing ethnic cleavege in access to the means of production, which particularly affected the tribals. For this reason the movements of Indian labour in the nineteenth century that resulted became not merely an effect, but an accurate index, of the development of capitalist relations of production.

[7] See B.B. Kling, *The Blue Mutiny: The Indigo Disturbances in Bengal, 1859-1862;* H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: the Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920,* (Oxford, 1974); A.G. Anderson, *Indo-Fijian Smallfarming Profiles of a Small Peasantry,* (University of Auckland, 1975); S. Amin, *Sugarcane & Sugar in Gorakhpur: An Inquiry into Peasant Production for Capitalist Enterprise in Colonial India,* (Delhi, OUP, 1984); B. Albert & A. Graves (eds), *Crisis and Change in the International Sugar Economy, 1860-1914,* (Edinburgh, 1984), and J. Breman, *'Taming the Coolie Beast'* (Delhi, OUP, 1990).

In the process tribals became both actively, and indirectly, one of the most heavily coerced elements in the migrant work-force, and the first resort of nearly every recruiting agent.

Exactly how this work-force was recruited has not been adequately explored, and a recent study of labour migration in India has gone so far as to explicitly exclude the tribal areas precisely because of the difficulties of fitting them into a simple dualistic model of the economy in which ecology is that principal determinant of differentiation and of distant labour sourcing.[8] These difficulties arise because the tribals bear many of the characteristics of a 'super-exploited' work-force, whose constitution has been crucially affected by the interventions of the colonial state. These same characteristics confound the application of a simple model of 'semi-feudalism' to the tribal areas (*pace* Standing & Saha), and to the origins of the early migrants. With this in view, this paper attempts a preliminary review of the dissolution of tribal society in the colonial period, with particular reference to central India, and to the nature and recruitment of tribal migrants by capitalist farmers and plantation owners, both within India and overseas. It is concluded that the scale of tribal migration in general has been greatly underestimated and that a large element of overt coercion was involved in the creation of labour surpluses and in the recruitment of migrants. These findings tend to undermine simple dualistic understandings of India's economy and of the transition to capitalism, and further call into question the value of the notion of a 'free' market in labour as a defining feature of capitalist relations of production.

THE MOBILIZATION OF LABOUR

The Creation of a Labour Surplus

The conversion of land into a scarce commodity in the colonial period has been noted in a number of recent studies of the Indian economy. It is, for example, very much to the fore in Sumit Guha's account of the *longue durée* in the Bombay Deccan, though the prime mover in Guha's analysis is demography. Neil Charlesworth has explored more broadly

[8] L. Chakravarty, 'Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in a Dual economy: British India, 1880-1920', *Indian Economic and Social History Review (IESHR)*, xii, Delhi, 1975, 205-28, p. 251, fn. 2.

the qualitative transformation of the Maharashtran economy, and Satish Mishra the growing dominance of mercantile interests, supported by the State, and the consequent stagnation of the agrarian economy that developed in this period. Michelle McAlpin has put forward a quite contrary interpretation to that of these three authors, but all have agreed on the importance of British land policy and the way it gradually undermined earlier patterns of dominance and surplus appropriation.[9]

Similarly studies of Bihar and the Punjab, published by Manosh Mitra, Naveed Hamid and H. Bannerjee, have also stressed the revolutionary impact of colonial settlement policies, and the recent publication of a whole volume of articles dealing with the relationship between agrarian power and agricultural productivity suggests that, despite Shahid Amin's admonitions to the contrary, there are still many facets to this question that yet remain to be explored.[10] Much has been said, for example, about the beneficiaries of British policies: the Malis of the Konkan, the Patidars of Gujarat, the Jotedars of Bengal and so on, but very little so far about those rendered powerless by British settlement policies, particularly as they affected some of the more backward and isolated parts of the country.

In central India, in the area of Mahakoshal, known by the British as the Central Provinces, colonial settlement policies had a very dramatic impact, especially in the tribal areas. Here, as in other parts, it hastened the dissolution of tribal societies and modes of production, and it was an important factor in the mobilization of labour for the purposes of capitalist production.

W.H. Sleeman, a settlement officer in Naninghpur district in the 1820s, was one of the first British officials to insist on the need for 'a concentration of capital' to bring about social and economic progress in this region. In the 1860s, following the 'lapse' of the remainder of the Bhonsle Raja's extensive territories to the British crown, the creation of 'the fee-simple in land' was then finally decided upon as the best means of effecting, as one officer put it, the agricultural improvement 'worthy of our high name and unquestionable honest aims'.[11]

Under the system the tenants were encouraged to produce by the imposition of 'a good, stiff rent', and settlement officers actively intervened to raise rents in the villages (by a procedure, borrowed from Bengal, known as 'arbitration') whenever, as was usual, they were considered to be insufficiently high. For those who would not take this medicine, the introduction of Tenancy Act IX from Bengal ensured that those in arrears could be summarily ejected and that none could claim occupancy rights until after at least twelve years of continuous cultivation.

In the more backward districts such as in Chhattisgarh, this meant that hardly any tenants were granted occupancy rights. In the tribal district of Mandla absolute occupancy tenant rights were created in the 1860s over an area of only 21,000 acres (out of an 'occupied area' of 350,000 acres) and the ordinary class of tenants-at-will accounted for 73.5 per cent of the agricultural population.[12] In the more developed districts of Jabalpur and Narsinghpur, far higher proportions of the tenantry were granted occupancy rights (62 per cent in the west of Narsinghpur district), but their holdings were small, and the newly-created landlords litigated furiously to ensure the ejectment of occupancy tenants in danger of extending their holdings.

The majority, at least of the best land, was thus placed in the hands of the malguzars, and a handful of privileged absolute occupancy tenants. Large areas of recently abandoned tenant land were also recorded as *sir* (home-farm) land, simply in order to enhance the government's revenue. Thus 'wholly deserted villages were in this way recorded as occupied by malguzars, who had sometimes not so much as seen them, much less commenced cultivation'.[13] In Hoshangabad the average amount of sir land held by each malguzar was 140 acres, but in addition it was ordered that, whenever possible, waste land amounting to 100 to 200 per cent of the cultivated area was to be included in each *mahal*, or malguzari estate.

In tribal areas these limits were greatly exceeded, and the boundaries of the malguzari estates were pushed well ahead of the real

[9] N.R.F. Charlesworth, *Peasants and Imperial Rule: Agriculture and Agrarian Society in Bombay Presidency, 1850-1935*, (Cambridge, 1985); Sumit Guha, *The Agrarian Economy of the Bombay Deccan, 1818-1941*, (Delhi, OUP, 1985); M.B. McAlpin, *Subject to Famine, op. cit*; S. Mishra, 'Commercialisation, Peasant Differentiation and Merchant Capital in Late 19th Century Bombay and Punjab', *JPS*, 10, 1.

[10] S. Amin, *Sugarcane & Sugar, (op. cit)*; H. Bannerjee, *Agrarian Society of the Punjab, 1849-1901*, (Delhi, Manohar, 1982); N. Hamid, 'Dispossession and Differentiation of the Peasantry in Punjab during Colonial Rule', *JPS.*, 10, 1; M. Mitra, *Agrarian Social Structure; Continuity and Change'in Bihar, 1786-1820*, (Delhi, Manohar, 1985); A. Rudra *et al* (eds), *Agrarian Power and Agricultural Productivity in South Asia*, (Delhi, OUP, 1984).

[11] MPCRO, Nagpur Commissioner, 1853, quoted in *Proprietary Rights Collection* p. 34, E.K. Elliott to Foreign Department, 12 May 1860.

[12] *Land Revenue Settlement Report (LRS.) Mandla, Final Report, 1904-10*, pp. 6-7.

[13] *LRS. Mandla, Final Report 1904-10*, p. 35.

frontier of settled cultivation. In Chanda district the proportion of waste rose as high as 401.3 per cent, much of this land being seized by the malguzars for their personal use.[14] This latter area, known as *khudkasht* (sub-let malguzari area) accounted for half of a typical malguzari holding by the 1880s, and twice as much again in the tribal areas. However, there were limits beyond which the newly-created malguzars in the more unsettled tribal areas could no longer exercise effective control. In these areas the forest or woodland was 'reserved' for the exclusive use of the government under the Forest Act of 1872. Tribal 'squatters' were ejected, and forest officers were appointed to ensure there was no 'illegal' exploitation of the forest reserves.

As one government officer put it: 'the constitution of government forests was the outcome, not so much of reservation for the purposes of forestry, but of exception from the alienation of proprietary rights'.[15]

Proprietary rights were not granted in areas of shifting cultivation, but in an equivalent area enclosed within one block, and attempts then made to grant this to a single malguzar. Thus in Ramgarh tahsil in Mandla district 353 villages were declared 'waste' because the cultivating area was not permananently occupied by Baiga or Gond tribesmen. Where the tribals could not be forced into the malguzari estates, the reservation line enclosed them within a 'ringed fence', confining them to a more intense (and taxable) use of the land. This rule, as one settlement officer put it, was 'most beneficial in depriving the wandering Gonds of the waste villages to which they now feel they can at any time remove'.[16]

More than once was the marking off of 'excess waste' given as a reason why it might be possible to raise the revenue rates, and the setting up of ryotwari estates in areas of government waste was specifically opposed where it might tend to lower rents and thence the government revenue.[17] Where ryotwari estates were later established, it was at a proportionately heavier assessment in order not to undermine the price of land and the availability of cultivators on the malguzari estates.

[14] MPCRO, CP Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce (RAC) Proceedings, May 29, 1872, now. 10-14, Memo by Lt. Col. Keatinge on the Waste Land Rules, 3 Oct. 1871.

[15] J.F. Dyer, *Introduction to the Land Revenue and Settlement System of the C.P.*, 3rd edn., (Nagpur, 1956), p. 76.

[16] IOR, Foreign Dept. Proceedings, July 1865, no. 30, J.H. Morris, Settlement Commissioner, Report on Settlement Operations, 19 June 1865.

[17] MPCRO, Letters to Govt. of India, Chief Commissioner CP, April 1866, and memo by Keatinge on the Waste Land Rules, *op. cit.*

In general, the system was judged to be invaluable as a means of 'strengthening the hands of the malguzars, and enabling them to establish what may be called market rates on cultivation, which they have hitherto been unable to do, being at the mercy of the cultivators, who move off at the slightest attempt to raise their rents'.[18]

The British settlement of the Central Provinces was therefore not a perpetuation of semi-feudalism, but 'a revolution, agricultural, fiscal, and social'.[19] The impact on various castes and communities depended on the class structure and prevailing state of agrarian relations in different parts of central India. The Kunbis, Malis, Telis and Brahmin cultivators of the Nagpur–Berar plain all survived fairly well, in part because a large proportion of this area was settled under the ryotwari system. In the central Narmada valley, the Lodhis, Brahmins and Rajputs, and in Chhattisgarh, the Telis, Brahmins, Kurmis and some of the Chamars were also among the lucky minority granted occupancy or proprietary rights. Some of the poorer Hindu tenantry were squeezed, but usually they were able to hang on as tenants-at-will. The tribals on the other hand were fairly consistently among the group who suffered expropriation either during or shortly after the settlement period. Thus in Mandla district the Gond tribals accounted for just over half of the total population in the early 1860s, but were granted proprietary rights in only 432 out of the total of 11,430 villages. The 14,000 Baigas, another tribal group, accounting for 4 per cent of the population, were granted only 20 villages, while Hindus from the Brahmin, Lodhi and Bania castes, though each accounted for only 1 per cent of the population, were granted rights in a total of 558 villages—the Brahmins alone owning 336. This pattern was repeated in all of the tribal districts of the Central Provinces.

In Bilaspur the tribals hung on to only 12.7 per cent of the villages, and in other tribal districts such as Betul, Seoni and Chhindwara, where tribals typically accounted for 35-40 per cent of the population, less than one in seven of the villages were allowed to remain in their hands. Often these tribals had been forced to take to the settled cultivation of inferior tracts of land at unrealistic levels of revenue assessment. Indebtedness resulted and large numbers of tribal villages were transferred or simply abandoned in the 20 or 30 years immediately following settlement. No

[18] MPCRO, Nagpur Residency and Secretariat Records, 1867, no. 45, Settlement Officer Mandla to Settlement Commissioner, 30 Feb. 1867.

[19] MPCRO, CPRAC Proceedings, 22 May 1872, Nos. 7-9, Minute by Col. Keatinge on the Mandla Settlement.

less than 270 villages were transferred in the Mandla district between 1868 and 1888, mostly to Marwari moneylenders, and the number of Gond villages fell from 294 to 129 in Raipur district between 1869 and 1912.[20]

However, between the first settlements of the 1860s and the year 1892, the overall rate of transfers actually recorded in the tribal districts of Mandla, Seoni, Betul, Chhindwara, Chanda and Balaghat was only 16.48 per cent compared with 28.56 per cent in the central Narmada valley, where the conflicts between landlords, moneylenders and tribals were much more acute. Between 1869 and 1874 some 16 per cent of absolute occupancy tenants in Chanda lost their rights, 20 per cent in Seoni (between 1867 and 1874) and 16 per cent in Raipur, but after the 1890s the situation seems to have stabilized slightly.[21] Tribal tenants were often left cultivating the worst quality *barra* soils using the most primitive techniques, but the rate of expropriation does seem to have slowed, in part, due to the tardy introduction of protective and tenancy legislation. Thus a tribal held on average a total of 13.54 acres (according to one estimate) in the 1890s, and by 1939-40 they were reported to be still holding 11.60 acres on average, despite the years of famine and depression that intervened.[22]

As time went on, the tribals of Mahakoshal seem to have been more often subjected to a process of gradual immiseration (*verelendung*), as described by Breman in the case of south Gujarat, rather than outright proletarianisation. This is apparent from the evidence of the 1929-30 Central Provinces Provincial Banking Enquiry, which suggested that by that date farming in Chhattisgarh and the tribal areas was markedly less viable than in the Nagpur plain or the Narmada valley.

The enquiry committee based its findings on an intensive study of 87 villages, chosen as representative of the state of the economy in each of the agro-economic zones of the Central Provinces. Indebtedness *per se* was found to be much higher in the more developed cotton-growing areas of Nagpur and Berar, but a far higher proportion of the cultivators here had the right to transfer their land, the value of which was sufficiently high to make the burden of these debts proportionately lower.[23]

[20] This data is drawn from the District Settlement Reports of the Central Provinces.

[21] MPCRO, Letters to the Govt. of India, 1875, Chief Commissioner CP to Dept. of Revenue, Agriculture and Commerce, 16 Jan. 1875.

[22] W.V. Grigson, *The Aboriginal Problem in the C.P. and Berar*, (Nagpur, 1944).

[23] This phenomenon, which goes against Malcolm Darling's rather gloomier view of rich peasant indebtedness, has also been noted by M.M. Islam in 'M.L. Darling and The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt: a Fresh Look', *J.P.S.*, 13,1, and by N. Bhattacharya in 'Lenders and Debtors: Punjab Countryside, 1880-1940', *Studies in History*, (Delhi, Sage, new series, 1, 2, 1985), pp. 305-42.

The value of their crop and the whole scale of their enterprise was much greater as well. Seventy-five per cent of farm labour in the Berar plains was hired, for example, and the average cultivators' holding was in excess of 29 acres. In Chhattisgarh and the tribal areas, by contrast, landlessness was far less common, accounting for less than 10 per cent of the rural population, but agricultural holdings were also far smaller (50 per cent in Bilaspur held less than 5 acres), and the capital invested in cultivation was far too low to ensure an adequate return. The majority of the cultivators, as a consequence, were heavily dependent on off-farm sources of income. Whereas the Nagpur–Berar plain had one of the largest rural proletariat in India, those to the east, in Chattisgarh and the tribal areas were generally a dependent peasantry, with many of their number periodically swelling the ranks of the urban and rural workforce in the more developed regions to the north, west and, increasingly, to the east.

The experience of the tribals in the adjacent territory of Chotanagpur was slightly different in that the tribal's loss of land was far more rapid and began at an earlier date. Census categories are unreliable when it comes to matters of caste. In general, early censuses in tribal areas were based largely on guess-work, whilst later censuses first underenumerated tribals, and then overnumerated them (after independence), as the status of 'the tribal' became more or less *cache*.[24] Nonetheless, the rate of immigration and expropriation does seem to have progressed much further, particularly in northern Chotanagpur, than in the CP, by the end of the nineteenth century. In the case of Chhattisgarh, in the CP, there was a large immigration of Chamars and Lodhis from north India and of Telis from the south at the beginning of the eighteenth century (if not earlier), and even Bastar was ruled by a dynasty of Andhran kings from the fifteenth century onwards. This meant that at the beginning of the nineteenth century the 'original' tribal population (meaning principally the Gonds) was already somewhat dispersed. However, as late as the 1870s 'tribals', as then defined, still constituted more than a third of the population in the eastern and plateau districts of the Central Provinces, and more than two-thirds of the population of Mandla

[24] Thus, according to the censuses, the tribal population of India actually increased from 5.3 per cent to 7.3 per cent of the total population between 1951 and 1971.

district, and of the feudatory states of Bastar, Kanker, Kalahandi and Surguja.

In Chotanagpur and the Santhal parganas as a whole, 44 per cent of the population was still classed as 'tribal' in 1881, but the northern districts of Palamau, Hazaribagh and Manhbum had been very heavily overrun by Hindu immigrants even before the grant of the Diwani to the British in 1765.[25] Here, up to 90 per cent of the population was Hindu by the second half of the nineteenth century, compared with only 10-30 per cent in the south, and not only was there marginalization, but also extensive expropriation, the tribals being rapidly squeezed out and often reduced to the status of *kamiya*, or bonded labourers. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was said, the size of holdings had been reduced to such a level that 'the great body of raiyats cannot indulge in what will be called a luxury in this country of a full diet of cereals all-round the years'.[26]

According to one survey, conducted in Sadr subdivision of Ranchi district in 1911, only 6.5 per cent to 20 per cent of the holdings amounted to 14 acres or more and were thus sufficient to support an average family.[27] As in Chhattisgarh, agriculture here was predominantly rain-fed, much of the cultivation taking place on inferior soils that could neither be double-cropped, nor sustain a single rice-crop for more than a few years without fallowing. Thirty per cent of the land consisted of this inferior soil (known as Tanr III), roughly the same as in Chhattisgarh, where a further 15 per cent of gravelly, laterite soil was to be found which was almost completely uncultivable.

These poor soils were extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in the monsoon, but more significantly, they failed in themselves to provide an adequate living. Altogether, the average 4.5 person kamiya household earned only 41 per cent of its annual grain requirements, and this meant that, at some time, one or more members of the household were forced to migrate.[28]

That these 'push' factors existed is not generally disputed. However, there has been some debate about their relative importance. Lalita Chakravarty and Prabhu Prasad Mohapatra, for example, have disagreed as to whether or not the limits of agricultural growth in Chotanagpur had actually been reached, and Mohapatra has pointed to a steady intensification of cultivation, an expansion in the cultivated area, and an increase in the cultivation of superior crops of lowland rice in several divisions. These prove, he claims, that Chotanagpur did not share the 'involutionary' characteristics that Chakravarty has argued are common to most of the labour catchment areas in India.[29] But Mohapatra has merely added detail. The ecological imperative remains, and when combined with other characteristics of the economy such as the insecurity of tenures, population pressure and the extortionate levels of rent (emphasized by Scherwin), the notion of 'involution', in a broad sense, is still applicable.

The same is the case with indebtedness. Pradipta Chaudhuri has urged, in a crude application of the 'forced commercialisation' thesis, in his study of migration from Orissa, that it was *the* most important factor.[30] Mohapatra has again pointed out not only considerable regional variation in Chotanagpur, but also the fact that migration could be lowest in those areas where indebtedness was highest if indebtedness actually forced migrants into a state of bonded servitude (as was frequently the case). He also shows that the quality of harvests did not correlate directly with the number of migrants leaving for Assam. In his conclusion, however, the instability of tenures (indicated by the amount of *don*, or lowland rice area, held as *bakast* by landlords and therefore cultivated by tenants-at-will), the burden of rent, and the unreliability of yields (indicated by the proportion of *tanr* or poor quality upland), *when combined* do correlate fairly well with the level of emigration from each *thana*, or subdivision.

Ecological limits, levels of surplus appropriation, famine and the quality of the seasons are thus none of them individually responsible for emigration, but when combined in that certain situation that charac-

[25] D. Schwerin, 'The Control of Land and Labour in Chota Nagpur, 1858-1908', in D. Rothermund and D.C. Wadhwa (eds), *Zamindars, Mines and Peasants: Studies in the History of an Indian Coalfield and its Rural Hinterland*, (Delhi, Manohar, 1978), pp. 21-68.

[26] B.C. Basu, *Report on Agriculture in the District of Lohardaga*, (Calcutta, 1911), quoted in Schwerin, p. 29.

[27] Schwerin, p. 26.

[28] Schwerin, p. 33.

[29] Lalita Chakravarty, 'Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in a Dual Economy . . . '; Prabhu Prasad Mohapatra, 'Coolies and Colliers: a Study of the Agrarian Context of Labour Migraton from Chotanagpur, 1880-1920', *Studies in History*, new series, 1, 2, 247-304.

[30] P. Chaudhuri, 'The Impact of Forced Commerce on the Pattern of Emigration from Orissa, 1901-1921', in K.N. Raj *et al* (eds), *Essays on the Commercialisation of Indian Agriculture*, (Delhi, OUP, 1985).

terizes dependence (or 'involution'), they are all important prerequisites. Many of the ethnic, spatial and temporal characteristics of migration in the long run are, nonetheless, still left unexplained by such an analysis. In this search for a positivist solution to the problem, Mohapatra concludes his study of Chotanagpur by placing the greatest emphasis on an (as yet unspecified) demographic factor 'perhaps located in the 1850s'.[31] There are echoes here of Sumit Guha's study of the Bombay Deccan. What may well be far more important factors are omitted or underplayed simply because they are less amenable to quantification.

A similar objection has to be levelled at Lalita Chakravarty's study.[32] In her enthusiasm for an ecological explanation for the origins of migration she is forced to regard levels of surplus appropriation in agriculture as constant and to exclude technical and institutional change from her analysis. These assumptions are clearly a non- starter in tribal areas, so they are omitted, as is the large and growing class of 'part-time' proletarian and seasonal labourers who upset her postulate of an 'agrarian proletarian equilibrium' in the nineteenth century.

The rapid loss of land by tribals, which we have discussed, and the general collapse of economies based on shifting modes of cultivation, is thus an important element in the origins of migration which needs to be taken more seriously into account. Studies of this problem also need to begin from a far earlier date than has hitherto been the focus of debate. It must be emphasized, however, that tribal migration was neither a new phenomenon in the colonial period, nor was it a once and for all creation of colonial policies. This would be to fall into the dualist trap. In fact long-distance rural–rural migration was common before the nineteenth century and it continued even after the growth in demand for labour in the major industrial centres such as Calcutta and Bombay. The explanation lies partly in the growth of regional inequalities and inter-regional dependency in the colonial period, but exactly how and why migrants ended up working in such far-flung destinations as Mauritius has so far remained something of a mystery. This lacuna has resulted from an over-reliance on naive supply-and-demand type models of the labour market, and from inadequate attention to the nature of the recruitment process itself.

[31] Mohapatra, p. 298.

[32] L. Chakravarty, 'Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force . . . ', *op. cit.*

(2) *The Re-orientation of the Rural Migrant*

That the actual process of recruiting migrant labour has received little attention is surprising when one considers that a reference is made to recruitment in almost every account. Mohapatra, Omvedt and Tinker comment on the preference expressed by Assamese planters for 'aboriginal coolies', but quite how this demand was met despite the abysmally low level of wages has never been fully explained.[33] The extremity of distress in rural areas has been suggested as a possible reason why tribals and peasants should take to this work, seemingly of their own accord. But this argument is difficult to maintain in view of the existence of employment far nearer home and the widespread use of migrant labour that is evident in agriculture throughout the colonial period. Mobility *per se* was also not a new phenomenon, a fact that has been receiving increasing attention in recent studies.

In Chhattisgarh in the 1820s, the British revenue superintendent, Colonel Agnew, wanted to arrange the payment of the revenue demand (*kists*) so that they would fall due after the cultivators had sold their surplus grain, but found this to be impossible because of the migratory character of the cultivators. He commented of the *ryots* that 'they have no local attachment, but are rather fond of change, that they will quit the village in which they and their family have resided for years, if death deprives them of one relative, that a headache is sufficient to induce them to migrate, and that in most cases when the result of the cultivation of the season has been favourable to them, they remove to another quarter'.[34] This continued even after the settlements of the 1860s, when the settlement officer of Bilaspur noted in a survey of 58,789 ryots that as many as 12 per cent of the tenants-at-will abandoned their fields and

[33] Figures cited by Dharma Kumar show that in 1901 about 437,000 persons of Indian origin sent back from Ceylon an *average* of Rs. 40, whilst the average Bihari in Calcutta is supposed to have sent home about Rs 30 each year in the early 1920s. This extra income would have been sufficient to enable only a few smallholding Bilaspuri cultivators to break even (according to the CP Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee). More to the point, conflicting evidence from Assam and elsewhere suggests that most earned only 5 or 6 annas a day, which was barely enough to enable them to survive on the plantation, let alone send remittances home. The average statistics cited probably disguise a huge difference between the sardars and recruiters, who were able to save, and the majority, who could not. See G. Omvedt, 'Migration in Colonial India . . . ', pp. 195-8.

[34] P. Vans Agnew, *Report on the Subah or Province of Chhattisgarh, 1820*, (reprinted Nagpur, c. 1930).

moved on to another village in the course of one year.[35] A custom known as *lakhabatta* was also common whereby the cultivators readily redivided the fields of a village amongst themselves so as to ensure that any new arrivals got a share of the best land. These customs the settlement officer attributed to 'the abundance of land, and the competition for tenants, as also the large admixture of a Gond element in the population'.[36]

Needless to say, in the tribal zamindaris and the remoter tribal districts of Mandla, Balaghat, Seoni, Chindwara, Betul and Bastar, shifting cultivation was the norm, and the notion of fixed rights in the land was completely unknown. As late as 1929 it was still said that 'unlike the Hindu cultivator of the Berar plains, the korku (tribal of Betul) is not wedded to his land and often does not mind leaving it', and instances were cited of Korkus abandoning their land if they had difficulty in paying the land revenue and going off and working for the Forest Department somewhere else, completely mindless of the loss of 'proprietary rights' that was likely to ensue.[37]

In Malwa, in Maratha times, there existed a large class of cultivating labourers, referred to as 'sookwasee' by Malcolm, who settled only for a few years wherever they expected to be best treated.[38] And in the

[35] *LRS Bilaspur, 1868*, p. 160. Apart from the above explanation, the migration of agriculturists was also blamed on the effects of famine, in 1869, the impatience of the newly created landlords to raise rents, and the higher wages being offered in the Berar territories. However, apart from the loss of agriculturists there was also a considerable migration to Berar of unemployed labourers and weavers from the small towns of Bhandara and Wardha, some of which lost up to a fifth of their population. One officer attributed this to the burden of the recently enhanced *pandhri* tax, but it was notable that most of the towns affected were heavily dependent on weaving and spinning. These migrations were therefore probably the consequence of a general state of depression due to competition from imported manufactured cotton goods, as well as the impact of harvest failures and inflexible tax demands. A census taken in 1870 in 22 towns and villages in Bhandara showed that the population had declined by 15 per cent, the Police estimating that overall some 28,000 individuals migrated to Berar from Bhandara in the same period. On the other side the Berar authorities estimated that some 59,395 individuals crossed into their territory in this period, only 9,525 of whom were later to return. See MPCRO, LGI 1870 2806/265 (CC to Home Dept., 28/10/1870; 1872. 4232/162 (CC to Financial Dept., 27/11/1872); and 1873,542/26 (J.W. Neil to Dept. of Agriculture, Rev., & Commerce, 21/2/1873.

[36] Ibid., p. 158.

[37] W.V. Grigson, *The Aboriginal Problem in the C.P. and Berar*, (Nagpur, 1944), p. 154.

[38] See S. Gordon, 'Recovery from Adversity in 18th Century India: Re-thinking Villages, Peasants, and Politics in Pre-modern kingdoms', *Peasant Studies*, 8, 4 (Fall, 1979), pp. 74-5.

Narmada valley in the 1830s it was said that cultivators were inclined to move off at the slightest attempt to raise rents, one revenue officer commenting that it was the 'patels' (revenue farmers or headmen) who needed protection rather than the other way around.[39] It seems to have been all the malguzar could do at that time simply to prevent the ryot from giving up his land and moving off to a more prosperous tract. In consequence, British Collectors of this period instigated 'compulsory cultivation schemes', and encouraged the 'recapture' of fields.[40] It also became an offence to grant land to or employ a cultivator if he still had unpaid debts or obligations in a neighbouring village.

This practice and the necessity for it ceased after the grant of proprietary rights and the reservation of forests in the 1860s, but rural–rural migration continued, only this time with both production and the rate of exploitation at a far higher level. The Narmada valley became a great exporter of wheat, and the migrants were the newly marginalized from the adjacent districts of Betul, Chindwara, Seoni and Mandla, and the reserved forests of Jarkahu Gokakhal and Lokhartalai in Hoshangabad.[41] These migrants, known as the *chaitharas,* accounted for upto a fifth of the work-force at harvest time even as late as the 1920s.[42]

Similarly large numbers of tribals were employed in the construction of railways. Thus the building of the Great Indian Peninsula Railway employed between 16,000 and 57,000 per day between 1856 and 1863, many of them casual labourers who had travelled from districts a considerable distance away from the works.[43] Migrant labourers, who probably accounted for a large proportion of Berar's excessively large labour force, were also important in the cultivation of

[39] MPCRO, Jabalpur Division Records (*JDR*), vol. 333, Capt. A. Hardy, P.A. Saugor, to J. Wilder, Agent of the Governor General, Jabalpur, May 1825; and JDR, 122 no. 56, F.C. Smith to Sudder Board of Revenue, 4 Nov. 1833.

[40] IOR, *Bengal Revenue Consultations*, renge 60, vol. 56, 13 April no. 74 (and enclosures); and JDR, 928, G.R. Crawfurd, P.A. Betul, to F.C. Smith, 10 Feb. 1832.

[41] See Crispin Bates, 'Class and Economic Change in Central India: the Narmada Valley, 1820-1930', in Clive Dewey (ed.), *Arrested Development in India: the Historical Dimension*, (Delhi, Manohar and Riverdale, USA, 1988).

[42] See C.N. Bates, 'Regional Dependence and Rural Development in Central India: the Pivotal Role of Migrant Labour', *Modern Asian Studies*, 19, 3, pp. 575-94.

[43] I.J. Kerr, 'Constructing Railways in India: an Estimate of the Numbers Employed, 1850-80', *IESHR*, 20, 3, (1983), 317-39. The number of migrants who took to these works could be compared to the flood of 'rinderpest labour'—tribals dispossessed by the loss of their cattle—which enabled the railway between Bechuanaland and Rhodesia to be constructed in southern Africa in the late 1890s: see S. Stichter, *Migrant Labourers*, (Cambridge, 1985), p. 10.

cotton in other major cotton tracts, such as in Khandesh and Gujarat.[44] In the Bombay Deccan, both the cotton-growing areas of Khandesh and the canal zones generated considerable employment for seasonal labour, according to Sumit Guha, who has estimated that the seasonal demand for labour may have employed as many as a million persons of both sexes (out of a total population of 11.5 million).[45]

In the Punjab, a migration between agro-economic zones (as well as between backward and developed regions), has been noted by N. Bhattacharya: 'The general movement of labourers was from the regions where the harvest was early (south) to regions where it was late (north), from the *barani* tracts where labour demand was marginal, to the irrigated tracts, where the intensity of cropping was higher and labour was much in demand, geographically from the south-west to the Central Punjab, and from there to the canal colonies'.[46] This was similar to the patterns of labour migration observed at the same time in the Central Provinces. Here there was by the 1920s, in addition to the migration of tribals to the wheat zone, a regular seasonal movement of labourers after the rice harvest from the districts of Balaghat and Bhandara in Chhattisgarh to Berar as *Jharis* and may be seen camped in the neighbourhood of all large ginning centres'. The Chhattisgarhis were also in the habit of going to the coal mines and iron works of Bihar and Orissa, the people of Balaghat and Bilaspur providing additionally a large proportion of the labour employed in the Pench valley coal mines and the manganese mines in Chindwara. Gonds in particular, it was said, 'habitually go 40 or 50 miles to the manganese mines for work', crossing from one side of Chindwara to another as well as into Nagpur. This seasonal migration had begun in the 1860s, and had become an established institution by the 1920s.[47]

These migrant, seasonal labourers tended to displace the more traditional *sepidari* system of year round semibonded labour (comparable to the *hali* system of south Gujarat), which had formerly

[44] See Bates, 'Regional Dependence and Rural Development . . . the Pivotal Role of Migrant Labour, (*op cit*), and J. Breman, *Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers: Rural Labour Circulation and Capitalist Production in west India*, (Delhi, OUP, 1985).

[45] S. Guha, *The Agrarian Economy of the Bombay Deccan*, p. 141.

[46] N. Bhattacharya, 'Agricultural Labour and Production: Central and S/E Punjab, 1870-1940', in K.N. Raj *et. al* (eds), *Essays on the Commercialisation of Indian Agriculture*, (Delhi, OUP), pp. 105-62, p. 128ff.

[47] BP, CID, 1922/336-7, Public Employment Agencies (M.V. Joshi and B.P. Standen to GOI, 31/12/21). See also MPCRO, LGI, 1870, CC to GOI, 29-10-1870, para. 10).

prevailed. A similar long-term trend away from bonded towards the use of casual and seasonal labour has been noted in the case of Gujarat, by Jan Breman, and in the case of Nellore district in Andhra Pradesh by M. Atchi Reddy.[48] Yet large-scale migrations in Tamilnad are mentioned in the report of the Royal Commission on Indian Agriculture, in which Sir George Paddison, the Commissioner for Labour in Madras Presidency, described a movement of population every year from the poorer districts to the highly irrigated tracts of the deltas: 'the numbers who so move cannot be ascertained. But thousands move every year from Vizagapatnam, from the uplands of Godavari, Kistna and Guntur to the lands watered by the Kistna and Godavari . . . in the harvesting and transplanting seasons.'[49]

In the same report it is stated that even Bengal, one of the most densely populated provinces in India, ' . . . employs thousands of labourers from the Santhal parganas of Bihar and the U.P.' The large jute-collecting centres like Narayangang, Chandpore and Serajganj, it was said, 'all employ large numbers of *paschimvallas* (westerners); and for a big jute crop in Bengal, Biharis are also employed in reaping the crop'.[50]

Rural–rural migration in search of employment in agriculture was therefore very common, and it often had to take place over fairly long distances so that there should be a significant gap between the time when the migrants' own harvest was due and when the harvest was due in the area in which they intended to work. Several examples of this are quoted at length in W.W. Hunter's 1885 report on rural migration and land reclamation.[51] However these migrations were rarely symptomatic of the growth of anything like a 'free market' in labour. Breman, for instance, has noted widespread coercion and duplicity exercised by the

[48] J. Breman, *Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers;* and M. Atchi Reddy, 'The Commercialisation of Agriculture in Nellore District, 1850-1916: Effects on Wages, Employment and Tenancy', in K.N. Raj *et. al (eds.), Essays on the Commercialisation of Indian Agriculture*, pp. 163-83. In one village (Alluru), Reddy found migrant labourers typically forming 50-60 per cent of the harvest workforce—see M. Atchi Reddy, 'Wage Data from Private Agricultural Accounts, Nellore District, 1893-1974', in *IESHR*, xvi, 3, (Delhi, 1979), pp. 301-22.

[49] *Royal Commission on Agriculture*, Minutes of Evidence, III, 315-16, and Report, 5576-7.

[50] *Royal Commission on Agriculture*, Minutes of Evidence, I, 12.

[51] This is discussed at length in D. Rothermund, 'A Survey of Rural Migration and Land Reclamation in India, 1885', in D. Rothermund, *The Indian Economy under British Rule*, (Delhi, Manohar, 1983), pp. 54-72.

jobbers or labour recruiters of Gujarat and the latter-day Biharis working in the Punjab are semi-bonded because the cost of transporting them, or their wage, has generally been paid in advance, often in a form (such as in clearance of a debt) from which the labourers themselves are unlikely to benefit.[52]

According to Brahma Nand, many of the labourers in Khandesh were 'likely serfs of the peasant-proprietors, bound to work year in and year out', and denied even the food necessary to maintain their health and strength.[53] This category of labourer, known as a *saldar* was required to work the whole year in return for an 'advance' which was insufficient to feed him, thereby encouraging debt and necessitating his 're-employment'. In the mid-nineteenth century many of these labourers were Bhil tribals. Some of these tribals purportedly withdrew from the labour market as the government began to introduce protective legislation and restrictions on the alienation of land in tribal areas, whilst the increase in the number of 'dwarf-holding cultivators' between 1901 and 1931 put growing numbers of ordinary Marathas onto the labour market in their place. However, in the mid-nineteenth century in this region marginalized or dispossessed tribals were one of the most important sources of cheap labour.

Not only debt, but also the cost of marriage forced many tribals to become bond-servants in central India (known as *bhagia* in Betul, or saldars in other parts) for two or three years, and such relationships, once established, were difficult to bring to an end.[54] A substantial cash advance such as that usually offered by an Assamese or Mauritian recruiter thus afforded considerable inducement. It would be more accurate, however, to describe the lack of opportunity in central India, rather than the abundance of it, as being the principal cause of migration. Thus F.J. Plyman, the Director of Agriculture for the Central Provinces in 1923, described the migration from Chhattisgarh as follows:

> . . . Three factors, that is a low standard of living, an absence of work for 7 to 8 months per annum, and the existence of a large body of small cultivators whose holdings are entirely inadequate, make this tract the principal one in the Central Provinces from which emigration takes place . . . A considerable amount of the movement is seasonal in character. The labourer leaves after the harvest of the paddy and returns for the sowing . . . The Chhattisgarh labourer also migrates to the iron and coal fields of Orissa and Bengal and the tea gardens of Assam.[55]

[52] See Breman, *op. cit.*, and M. Dingwaney and U. Patnaik (eds), *Bonds of Servitude*, (Delhi, 1985).

[53] Brahma Nand, 'Aricultural Labourers in Western India', *Studies in History*, new series, 1, 2, pp. 221-46, p. 238ff.

[54] W.V. Grigson, *The Aboriginal Problem in C.P. and Berar*, p. 240.

Chhattisgarh had many of the characteristics of an 'involutionary' area where emigration combined with rising land prices and population growth (albeit from a low level), and the famines at the end of the century were therefore sufficient to push many of the inhabitants of Chhattisgarh and the other tribal districts of the region into migrating not merely to Berar, but often further afield. Thus in 1894 only 5.4 per cent of migrants to Assam were from the Central Provinces, but with the onset of famine the proportion of CP migrants (including children) rose to 28.2 per cent in 1896, 37.7 per cent in 1900 and 9.2 per cent in 1901.[56] Thereafter, the revenue settlement of the tribal feudatory states, rinderpest epidemics, and erratic harvests put further pressure on the tribals and many were forced to migrate to the coalfields of Bihar. Where formerly there had been none, 10 per cent of migrants to Manbhum (where the Jharia coalfield was located) and Burdwan (Raniganj coalfield) were from CP or UP by 1921.[57]

These migrants were doubly coerced: firstly, by the restrictions imposed on the ownership of land and capital at home, and secondly, often duped by the recruiters who took them to the coalfields or further afield. The tribals, being more heavily coerced at the first stage, were more readily victimized at the second, and the fact that they often migrated great distances when 'opportunities' lay far closer to home is testimony above all to the crucial role of the recruiter.[58]

Tribals did not always migrate from their villages because of unemployment. For many, migration was a means of escaping social exploitation or physical coercion at home. A typical example is that of Singaria, a Gond woman aged 17, from the village of Nagdon in the Dindori tahsil in Mandla—one of three similar cases dealt with by the Mandla district court at this time.[59] Singaria was married at the age of 12 to Matadin, the 11-year old son of Tithru (alias 'Lalsa'), 'a respectable malguzar' of the village. She lived for the next five years with his

[55] *Royal Commission on Agriculture in India*, Evidence, vol. vi, p. 4.

[56] See *Annual Reports on Labour Immigration into Assam*, (Calcutta).

[57] C. Simmons, 'Recruiting and Organising an Industrial Labour Force in Colonial India: the Case of the Coalmining Industry, c. 1880-1939', *IESHR*, vol. xiii, no. 4, p. 456.

[58] See Rothermund, *op. cit.*, and Marina Carter, 'Indian Labour Migration to Mauritius and the Indenture Experience, 1834-74', D. Phil, (Oxford, 1987).

[59] MPCRO, Comm. & Indy, Dept. (CID), 1916/9-34.

family before running away to Assam, making the journey in *chet* (March) 1915 in the company of Molin (alias Debia), a licensed recruiter of the Sephinjuri Bheel Tea Company in Sylhet.

Singaria was possibly put into contact with the recruiter by Jharri, one of his relatives, and a resident of the locality. Before making her escape Singaria left her father-in-law's home on the pretext of wanting to pay a visit to her husband's second wife, Manmath, at Dongaria. Having made her way to the village of Sangrampur in Niwas tahsil, about three kilometres from Nagdon, she met up with Molin and Jharri with the aid of another of Molin's relatives, Kancharia. According to Kancharia, Molin and Jharri told her that they also were heading to Dongaria, and they and Singaria then left together. However, rather than go to Dongaria, they went instead to the Tea Districts Labour Association (TDLA) Recruiting Station at Jabalpur. Here Singaria was interviewed by the local agent of the TDLA, a Mr. Mackay, to whom she gave her name as Mst. Dharya and pretended that she was the wife of the recruiter saying: 'Debia Sirdar is my husband. He went to Assam with his mother (Gansoo) two years, leaving me with my parents Sadoo and Jania in Majhewali village, thana Shahpura, district Mandla. Now my husband has come back to take me up to Sephinjuri Bheel Tea Garden, Sylhet, where he is now working and living, and I am going with him there of my own free will.'[60] A delightfully complicated story, though one cannot rule out the possibility that, Singaria may have known Molin prior to their 'employment'—although Molin himself stoutly denied ever before having met her. Shortly after arriving at Jabalpur, Molin and Singaria left for Assam where upon arriving, they were indeed married.

Singaria's reasons for leaving, as she told her friends on the tea estate, were that her husband used to beat her and tie her to a charpoy and, on one occasion, 'tied her to a horse's heels'. In response to questioning she insisted that she had in no way been deceived but had gone of her own free will. The case however was made a *casus belli* by the Malguzar of Nagdon, presumably because the honour of his family had been offended, and after Molin's return to Mandla a year later to carry out further recruitment, he had him arrested and imprisoned on the charge of abducting a minor. In support of this the Kotwar of Maholi

[60] MPCRO, CID, 1916/9-50 'Changes in the working of the rules under the Assam Labour Emigration Act'. Letter of complaint from Messrs. Begg, Dunlop & Co., TDLA, 14/2/1916.

(where she was born) produced forged evidence, at the Malguzar's instigation, showing that the girl was only fourteen at the time of her recruitment—old enough to get married it may be noted, but technically still under the guardianship of her father-in-law. In the face of this evidence the district magistrate was more than inclined to take the side of the Malguzar, and Molin, the recruiter, was sentenced to six months hard labour. Only after strenuous efforts on the part of the TDLA agent, and the production of medical evidence proving the girl's majority was Molin finally released, by which time he had already served half of his allotted sentence.

The case has all the characteristics of an intra-village squabble, but it effectively illustrates the point that migration, though a conscious choice, was never a free one, and although it was a liberation for some, it always derived from circumstances of oppression or deprivation. Interestingly, the case also highlights the ambivalent attitude of the local administration, which was required, albeit reluctantly, to co-operate with the Local Agents and Licensed Recruiters who replaced the contractors and *arkatties* (unlicensed recruiters) who controlled the trade prior to 1915. The act which introduced this reform, the Assam Labour Emigration (Amendment) Act of 1915, was designed to reduce abuses, though practically, as in the case of Singaria, unlicensed recruiters such as Jharri and Kancharia still often played an important role as intermediaries.[61]

Although the establishment of local agents of the TDLA helped to cut down abuses, they too could be corrupt—as the records of prosecutions attest. Furthermore, although now 'licensed', a great many practices from the previous unlicensed system of recruitment continued. Thus the recruiters appointed under the 1915 Act still received 'advances' ranging from Rs 8 to Rs 16 for every labourer recruited (more in places like Jabalpur, less in Chhattisgarh), only a small portion of which was ever passed on to the labourers. Singaria, for example, received nothing, though Kancharia, who aided in her escape, was given a rupee 'to buy bangles'. These inducements were clearly not enough to tempt ordinary cultivators however, who would often demand a substantial sum to help repay a debt before agreeing to leave and, in the search for recruits, contractors began to concentrate more and more on

[61] MPCRO, CID, 1913/9-3, A.B. Napier to sec. to CC, 2/5/1913; and 1916/6/9-20: 'Note summarising the changes effected in the law relating to the recruitment of labourers for Tea Estates . . . '.

the tribal areas from the 1920s onwards. 1918-19 yielded an especially large number of recruits, owing to bad harvests, and 3,872 recruiters (or 'sardars') based in Raipur and Bilaspur managed to collect an average of 7.8 labourers each: a total in excess of 30,000.[62] In the following two years, however, the figures were not so favourable, and in the period 1918-19 to 1921-2 the overall figures for the CP indicated an average of 3.5 labourers being recruited each by an annual average of 3,628 operating, officially, in the province.[63] By this date it was said that the majority 'are generally jungly people from the backwoods' recruited from 'the native States'. In most of the feudatory states such recruitment was in fact illegal, but a loophole had been left in the CP Emigration Manual regarding Bastar, which was targeted as a recruitment area by the TDLA in the mid-1920s 'with the result that no less than 28 villages in the Kutru Zamindari and 6 villages in the Bhopalpatnam Zamindari have become entirely depopulated'.[64] This recruitment was carried on mainly by garden sardars who had been granted certificates in the neighbouring districts of Raipur and Chanda. However at least twenty sardars were detained who had been issued certificates for the state of Bastar itself, even though the issuing of such certificates had never been officially approved.

The ignorant and impoverished Bastaris were, not surprisingly, 'considered as particularly good coolies for tea gardens and . . . are in great demand', though the political agent noted that if Bastar had a ruling chief he would almost certainly have disapproved, as he had when asked on the last occasion in 1911. Fortunately, an uprising in the state in that same year meant that the administration had fallen into the hands of well-meaning amateur anthropologists-cum-administrators such as W.V. Grigson and Edward Hyde, who attempted to conserve the traditional society and to backpeddle on some of the changes introduced by earlier British advisers in Bastar (such as the development of commercial forestry, the regular settlement of the land revenue, and the introduction of Christian missionaries) which had provoked the revolt. When

[62] *The Annual Report on the Working of the Assam Labour Board*, year ending 30th June 1920, appendix C. Overall, out of a total of 248,343 recruited to work in Assam in 1918-19, some 41, 141 came from the Central Provinces. The following year, 1919-20, 25,540 out of a total of 103,510 recruited came from the Central Provinces.

[63] BP, CID, 1922/36-7: 'Public Employment Agencies' a continuation of file no 11-6: 'Migration from Chhattisgarh . . . '.

[64] BP, CID, 1925/1-2 'Amendment to the C.P. Inland Emigration manual', W.E. Ley, Political Agent C.P. Feudatory States. 20 October 1924.

they realized the scale of recruitment that was going on they attempted to ban tea garden sardars from the state by a separate enactment in 1922, but the Government of India refused to allow this amendment to be passed. Recruitment thus continued rising rapidly in the mid-1920s, due to 'the low wages prevailing at present in the district compared with those in Assam'.[65] The method of recruitment, together with the disadvantages of these activities (from the state's point of view), was described in the administration reports of Bastar for 1936 and 1937.

> 'There was the usual emigration to the Assam Tea Gardens which it has been found impossible to prevent . . . It appears that many of the young Marias of Dantewara tahsil go to the Tea Gardens in order to 'see the world' and to experience such adventures as a ride in a train . . . Recruiting of labour for the Assam tea gardens is prohibited in the State, but as Bastar labour is in considerable demand on some of the estates, coolies who have returned frequently persuade their fellow villagers to proceed to outside recruiting depots. These recruiters hold licenses for the adjacent parts of British India where recruiting is permitted, and during the year 27 Sirdars were convicted for illegally recruiting coolies in Bastar. The Durbar is put to a disadvantage in that Bastar labour is not repatriated into the State, but into the Jeypore Estate of Orisa, where they are recruited, and many of them are reported to stay on, taking up land there.[66]

The only way to avoid the permanent loss of labour in this manner was to set up a recruiting depot in Bastar itself and, bowing to the inevitable, the state administrators eventually agreed to this, an agreement being signed between the TDLA and the state durbar in 1939. By 1943 the annual total of recruits from this depot amounted to 1,361, with more than 700 sirdars from the depot being active in the area.

The importance of tribal labour is further confirmed by statistics given by the District Magistrate of Bilaspur, an adjacent but predominantly Hindu district, which showed that of 1,901 recruits collected by the Agent there in 1935, 487 were Gonds, 877 from 'other depressed classes', 79 Chamars, and only 200 Hindus. A large proportion of these recruits came from predominantly tribal areas, not just from Bastar, but also from Sirguja, Rewah, Korea, Raigarh and Udaipur.[67] Amongst these there continued to crop up cases of women migrating in order to escape their husbands, such as a woman called Masnoo, who was

[65] BP, CID, 1935/33-11: 'Information supplied to the controller of Emigrant Labour'.

[66] *Report on the Administration of Bastar State for 1936*, p. 13 and *for 1937*, p. 13, (Jagdalpur).

[67] BP, CID, 1935/33-11.

reported to have eloped from her village in Mandla (again) in 1936, taking her children with her.[68] Many were luckier than she was, and managed to evade arrest and imprisonment, and so serious did this problem become that a special clause was entered into the CP Emigration Rules in 1937 to allow women to be detained for up to three days 'if unaccompanied by husbands'. Clearly the administration was extremely distressed by such goings-on, though little can be known of the views of the Gonds.

These women at least had some knowledge as to their likely fate. More tragic were the occasions, such as during the scarcity in 1921, when large numbers of Chhattisgarhis migrated to Jamshedpur in Bihar in the belief that they would be offered work in the Tata Steel Works, only to find that there were no such vacancies. They then had to return to their villages even more destitute than they had been when they left.[69] Other migrants were frequently led to Raniganj in Chotanagpur by recruiters on the presumption that they were to be given work in the collieries, only to be shipped off to Assam; whilst Bastaris being recruited for work in the Dooars tea plantations (which were beyond the jurisdiction of the TDLA) commonly thought they were headed for 'Bhutan'. Only when it was too late did they discover their real destination.[70] In such cases the decision to migrate was taken not simply in ignorance but was made on the basis of wilful disinformation. But the recruitment of *adivasis* still had its defenders, such as the District Commissioner of Nagpur who confidently asserted that in Bastar

> 'as in probably all the C.P. states and much of Chhattisgarh, the pernicious system of semi-slavery, known locally as the 'kabari' system, which is exactly like the *kamiauti* system in Chotanagpur and the *vetti* and *khambari* systems in North Madras . . . is widespread and, in the absence of money lenders and rural credit arrangements, migration to Assam is almost the sole means of escape from its clutches . . . I have seen the operations of the T.D.L.A. at Raipur and Koraput in the Vizagapatnam Agency and warmly endorse their arrangements for dealing with recruits . . . I add that the operations of the T.D.L.A. in the Jeypore Zamindari have been one of the principal factors tending to the abolition of serfdom and begar . . . '[71]

[68] BP, CID, 1936/11-16.

[69] BP, CID, 1922/11-6

[70] C. Simmons, 'Recruiting and organising an industrial labour force . . . ', pp. 471-3. One Dooars recruiting agent even carried on the ancillary trade of kidnapping Chamar women for shipment to the Punjab, for doubtlessly immoral purposes. See B.P., C.I.D. 1927/11-6, W.H. Shoobert to Comm. Nerbudda Division, 8 June 1927.

[71] BP, CID, 1932/11-7: views on Royal Commission.

Such views were rare however, and the role played by deception and crude coercion in the process of recruitment for the Assam tea gardens was often overwhelming.[72] The system of *kangani* recruiters and 'coast advances' introduced similar elements of deception and coercion into the emigration of non-Brahmins and Adi-Dravidians to the coffee plantations of Ceylon.[73]

The tea trade and migration to Assam did not really take off, however, until the late 1870s. Before that, the biggest employers for plantation work were in Mauritius, and it is no coincidence that in the early years of this trade a significant proportion of the recruits were from tribal areas.

Recruitment Overseas

The Case of Mauritius

The early recourse to recruiting in tribal areas was to a large extent shaped by employers' perceptions of the availability and suitability of 'hill coolies' for plantation production. The tribal inhabitants of Chota Nagpur in eastern India were among the first groups to be tapped as a potential work-force for indigo and tea production in early nineteenth century India. Indigo planters and businessmen such as Dwarkanath Tagore testified to the 'habitual migratory patterns' of tribals who were employed in manufacturing concerns in the 1830s.[74] In seeking an appropriate labour force, Mauritian planters drew upon these experiences of capitalists operating within the sub-continent. They were consequently aware of the possibilities of recruiting 'hill coolies' from the interior of India before the onset of organized emigration.[75] This knowledge was rapidly passed on to European capitalists seeking labour in far-flung corners of the British empire.[76] The contemporary appraisal

[72] R. Jayaraman, 'Indian Emigration to Ceylon: Some Aspects of the Historical and Social Background of the Emigrants', *IESHR*, vol. III, no. 4, Dec. 1967, pp. 319-60.

[73] H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, 1975; Mohapatra, *op. cit.*; S. Chatterjee, and R. Das Gupta, 'Tea Labour in Assam 1861-1868', *EPW*, xvi, 1981.

[74] *PP* 1841 (45) *Calcutta Commission of Enquiry* (*CCE*) evidence, Dwarkanath Tagore.

[75] PRO *Colonial Office* (*CO*) 167/182 Bergstein to Col. Sec., 1 May 1834; MA, *Le Cerneen*, 25 Aug. 1842.

[76] Demerara planters requested a supply of 'hill coolies' from Calcutta firms involved in the Mauritian 'trade', *PP* 1837-8 (180), p. 143-4. Pastoralists in Sydney were similarly

of the tribal migrant is evident from the report of the New South Wales pastoralist, John McKay, who was seeking authorization for Indian immigration:

'*dangas* . . . entertain no prejudices of caste of religion, and are willing to turn their hands to any labour whatever . . . In their own country they have but little rice, and eat snakes, lizards, rats, mice etc. Their clothing is simple, and scanty and they eat only once, rarely twice, in 24 hours.'[77]

As demand for labour gathered momentum in Mauritius with the impending liberation of slaves threatening an expanding plantation economy, the 1837-8 season witnessed the first large-scale exportation of labourers from Calcutta to Mauritius. Significantly, the colonial government had actively encouraged the recruitment of tribals, considering them best adapted to the agricultural requirements of planters, and recommending, in a Government circular of 1836 that:

'especial Care be now taken to ensure that the persons who may be engaged shall have been known as really Agricultural Labourers in their own Country (of the Class called Hill Coolies when coming from Calcutta).[78]

The proportion of designated 'hill tribes' on emigrant ships in these years was consequently high, averaging between 20 per cent and 50 per cent of all emigrants per ship. Up to 90 per cent of migrants on board some ships were tribals (see Figure 1).

Over succeeding years, however, the experience of shipping tribals —who were deemed susceptible to high mortality levels in transportation and on the plantations—gradually produced a shift away from their importation and towards the utilization of the cultivating and artisanal castes of southern and eastern India (see Figure 2).[79] In this first period of legal but unregulated labour migration to Mauritius (1834-9) and during the prohibition of the traffic between 1839 and 1842, mortality statistics are not readily available. After 1842, death rates on emigrant ships were published, but the caste or region of origin was not given. It is possible to demonstrate a link, however, between ships carrying large

interested, PP. 1837-8 (669), *Report from the Select Committee on Transportation*, p. 175. Appendix B, J. Mayo, 'Remarks on the employment of Indian labourers out of their own country'.

77 *PP* 1837-8 (669), ibid., J. McKay, 'Memorandum on Indian Immigration', p. 174.

78 *PP* 1837-8 (180) Government Notice, Port Louis, 18 Feb. 1836, p. 76.

79 MA, PE Emigration Certificates; MA, *Protector of Immigrants Reports;* IOR, BEP *Protector of Emigrants Annual Reports*, Geoghegan Report, p. 67.

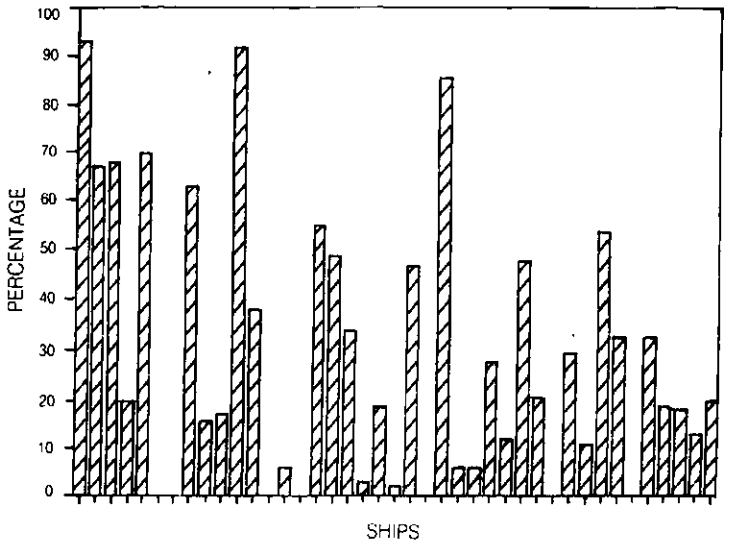


Figure 1. Proportions of Tribals on Ships (Calcutta to Mauritius, 1837-8)

SOURCE: *PP* 1841 (45) Appendix 2a 'Tabular Statement of Ships which have sailed from the port of Calcutta under Regulation no 5 of 1837', p. 99.

numbers of tribals and an excessive mortality rate. Thus, the Immigration Register of the ship 'Marion' (on which 48 Indians had died during the voyage and two at the Civil Hospital after the vessel landed) showed that over 40 per cent of arrivals were tribals. Further tribals or 'dhangurs' are recorded to have died within a few months on the several estates to which they had been sent.[80] An explanation for the apparently greater susceptibility of tribals to disease on their way to Assam or to the colonies has recently been put forward by Shlomowitz and Brennan. They point out that cholera, endemic in Bengal, was only epidemic in Chota Nagpur, so that recruits from there passing through Calcutta on their way to Assam or elsewhere were at greater risk from the disease.[81]

80 MA PE Immigration Registers and PP. 1847 (325) encl. 1 'Return of Immigrants introduced into Mauritius', Aug. 1846, p. 273.

81 R. Shlomowitz & L. Brennan, 'Mortality and Migrant Labour in Assam 1865-1921', *IESHR*, March 1990.

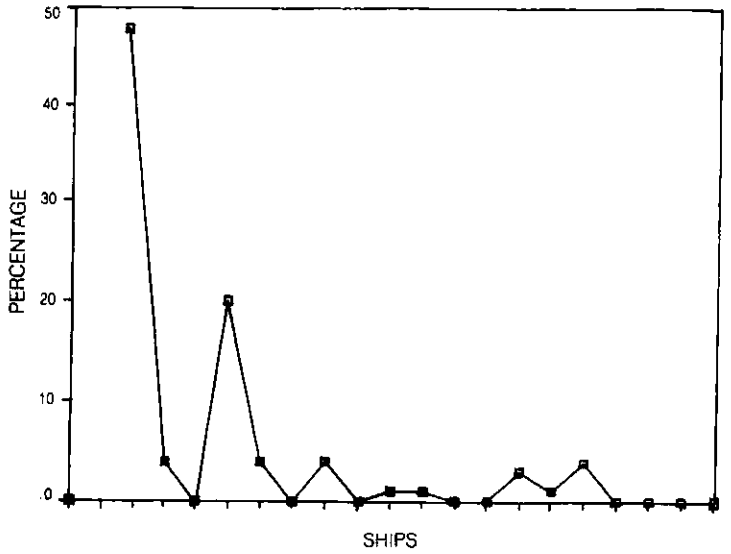


Figure 2. Tribals on Emigrant Ships (Calcutta to Mauritius, 1842-72)

SOURCE: MA PE Immigration Registers, 1842-72

A link between this epidemiological evidence and falling recruitment levels in Chota Nagpur is thereby shown (see Figure 3).

If the preference of labour exporters for tribal migrants began to wane, doubts were also surfacing as to the willingness of these groups to enter into long-term contracts for distant plantations. The Commission of Enquiry set up in Calcutta to investigate overseas migration to Mauritius and British Guiana in 1839 provided evidence of difficulties experienced in recruitment of tribals. An attempt to recruit Dhangars to go to Assam in January 1839 was described thus:

> I lost no time in sending for mates and the moondas and pahas of villages who are considered to possess influence among their brethren . . . and offered them rewards if they would procure the number of Dhangers required willing to proceed to Assam. They immediately went out into the country, and also visited the Haths, to which the Coles resort in great numbers, but could find none who were willing to proceed to Assam . . . which they cannot ascertain has been visited by any of their brethren. They also expressed their fears that I might be

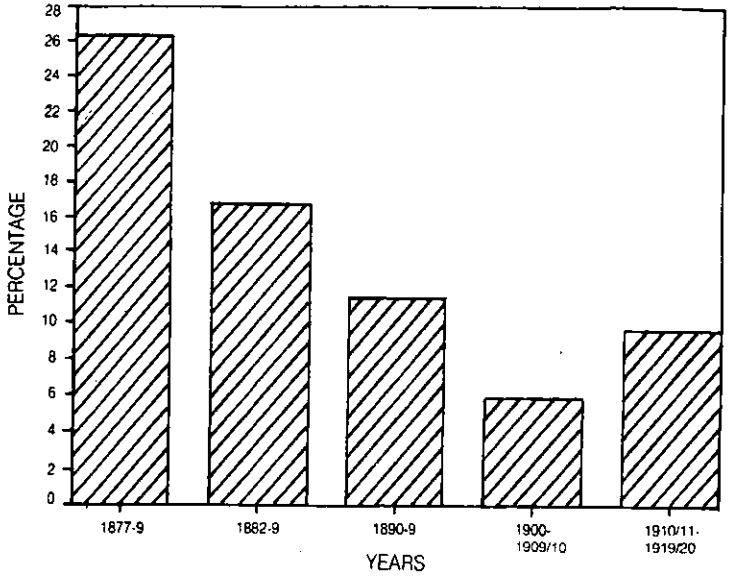


Figure 3. New Tribal Recruits in Assam, 1877-1920

SOURCE: *Annual Reports on Labour Immigration into Assam*, (Shlomowitz & Brennan, *op. cit.*)

> endeavouring to procure them to send them beyond sea, as several had been sent from Calcutta by gentlemen.[82]

Doubts also began to be expressed about the then current perception of tribals as established and voluntary migrants.[83] Others were at pains to demonstrate the beneficial effects of long distance migration for the tribals. One observer asserted that a 'superabundance of labour' existed in Bengal which promoted *hill coolies* to 'wander in search of work not

[82] *PP* 1841 (43) Captain T Wilkinson, Agent to the Governor General South-western Frontier to N Wallich, Secretary to the Tea Committee, 20 Feb. 1839.

[83] 'The late discussions in the newepapers on the exportation of Coolies, in which they have always been spoken of as Dhangers, i.e. Coles, has probably led the (tea) committee to entertain an opinion that the Coles are willing to expatriate themselves . . . They have no objection to leave Nagpore for time, to be employed as labourers, but always refuse to take their families with them, or to leave this country permanently . . . ' J. Davidson, South-western Frontier to N. Wallich, Secretary Tea Committee, 30 March 1839 in ibid.

only over all the Bengal provinces, but as far to the northward as Delhi'. He argued that they should not be deprived of the 'outlet' which Mauritius provided.[84]

The selection of the indentured work-force was however dependent not only or simply on existing evidence of availability of rural migrants, but also on planter perceptions of the requirements of sugar production. Thus tribal women continued to be valued on the assumption that they would be 'of the greatest use upon the plantations, being capable of performing any quantity of work' although dhangurs as a group had gone out of favour.[85] A further attempt to import Santhals into Mauritius in 1857 was made only when the existing labour supply was deemed insufficient. On this occasion a representative of the planters sought to convince Indian officials that the Santhals were 'labouring now under extreme destitution' and that migration could relieve them of the moneylenders 'who have driven them to rebellion and their present abject state of misery'[86]. The Commissioner of the Santhal parganas replied in no uncertain terms:

> It is hopeless at present to expect Santhals to go to the Mauritius. They are far too well off and too fond of their own country. Here and there some scarcity has existed, but the rail, the coal mines, and the timber forest afford work for those fit for it, . . . it is a great mistake to suppose the Santhals are in a state of abject misery.[87]

Yet the planters in Mauritius had proved that it was possible to procure tribals when this group had seemed most suited to their needs in the initial phase of indentured recruitment. Their success in mobilizing labour depended initially on local recruiters. Coolies returning to Calcutta from Mauritius in 1840 and 1841 testified to the deceptions used against them. Subboo of Hazaribag recounted:

> I met the duffadar at Hazareebaug; he asked me if I wanted employment; I said, 'where?' he told me there is a road making in Calcutta, and I would be employed there and get pay five rupees per month, besides food and clothing; three of us then came to Calcutta with the duffadar, and were lodged at Sulkea; the same duffadar told us that there was no employment for us in Calcutta, but if we chose to go to the Mauritius, from which place he and others had just returned with plenty of money, we could get employment.[88]

[84] PRO CO 167/235 Captain Pottinger to Russell, 8 Jan. 1841.

[85] *PP* 1846 (691 III) Gomm to Stanley, 21 Jul. 1845 quoting the comments of Mr. Caird, Mauritius Emigration Agent at Calcutta.

[86] IOR L/P&J/1 Vol. 86 Emigration: Home Correspondence, Guthrie, Chairman Mauritius Association to Labouchere, 10 June 1857.

[87] IPP 188/148 encl. in Secretary to the Government of Bengal to Secretary to the Government of India, 17 Oct 1857.

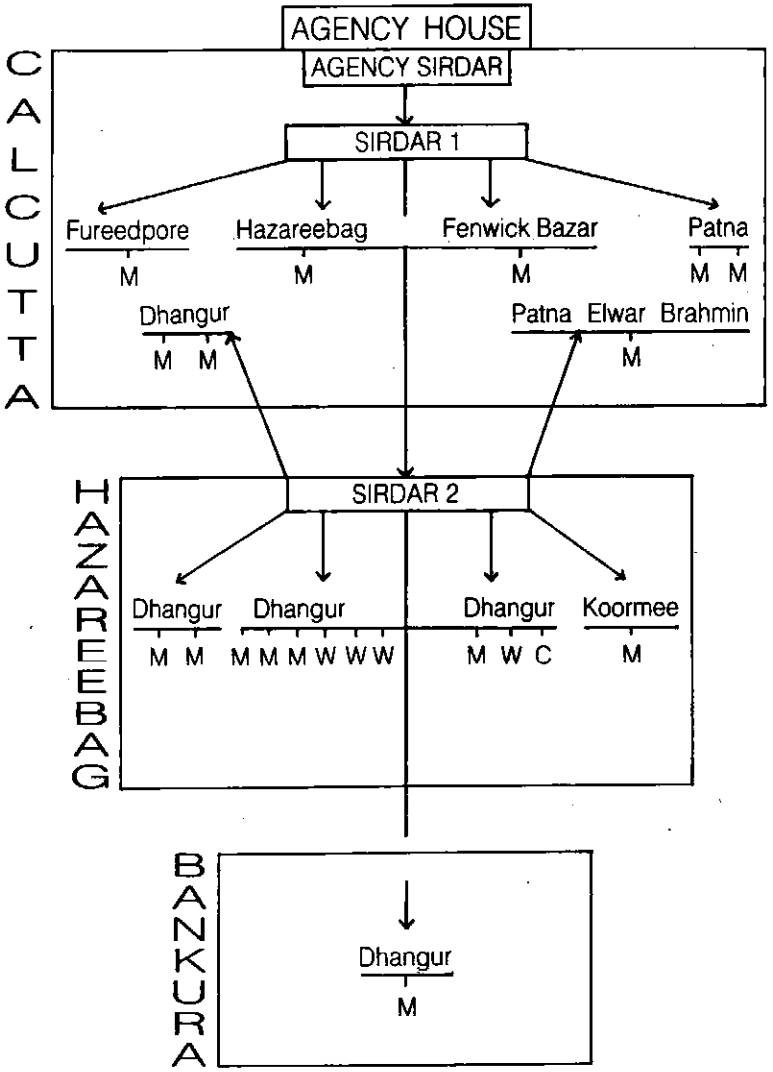
Ramdeen, interviewed at Calcutta Town Hall on 10 December 1840, spoke of a voyage made to Mauritius five years previously, with a group of 250 coolies, 50 of whom were 'dangahs', and who had been told that they were 'engaged to do the Company's work', and had considered this to mean work for the Indian government.[89] Significantly in this case, those recruited had all been collected from Calcutta and its environs where they had come 'in search of employ'. Another batch of coolies returned from Mauritius on the 'Shah Allum' and interviewed as part of the Commission's enquiries revealed the pivotal role of a dhangur recruiter in Calcutta, known to them as Ramanath, or Ramana. Thus Mohesh Ram reported 'I was a cultivator of Hazareebagh; Ramana sent a person for me; I worked at Sugar canes; I had not been accustomed to it', and Boorhan said 'Ramanath, sirdar, embarked me from Ramghur; he sent a person for me'. Ramanath was evidently responsible for the collection of recruits from a number of areas: Motee Ram explained 'Rama, sirdar, got me employed. I have seen his son; I come from Bancoorah, and was sent for by a chit of his; he put me on board the Elizabeth'.[90] The role of this recruiter was further illuminated by the return migrants of the 'Graham'. One of them, who had gone to Mauritius as a *sirdar* in charge of other men, explained that Ramanath was the sirdar of the 'house of Gillanders & Co' in Calcutta and had obtained his commission for him. From the testimonies of these return migrants it has been possible to recreate one segment of the recruitment picture (see Figure 4).

The recourse to such port firms as agents of supply prior to 1842 had been productive of much abuse in the collection of recruits. As a result, both the planters and the governments involved encouraged stricter legislative controls of registration and shipping. This, together with competition in recruiting from the West Indian and French colonies, pushed recruiting operations further into the 'interior'. Problems of supply could never be completely solved, however, as long as recruiters were paid a commission per migrant shipped, which encouraged fraud and misrepresentation as they endeavoured to gain their bounties with as little exertion as possible.

[88] *CCE, op. cit.*, para 883-90.

[89] *PP* 1841 (427) Grant Minute, Appendix, p. 45.

[90] Ibid., p. 48-9.



Agency House	–	Gillanders & Company
Agency SIRDAR	–	Ramanath (Dhangur)
SIRDAR 1	–	Gholam Ally (Muslim)
SIRDAR 2	–	Roghoonath (Dhangur)

Figure 4. Mode of Recruitment of a Group of Tribal Migrants, *c* 1836

SOURCE: PP 1841 (427) Grant Minute, Appendix, p. 52-4.

It was more profitable to hire *chupprassis* and others to intercept bands collected by rival agencies, or to substitute rejected emigrants for others who had absconded, than to engage in time-consuming searches of the rural districts. Likewise, fairs, festivals, and religious gatherings provided richer pickings than villages.[91] It was also, in many cases, not practical for recruiters to engage in their trade away from the relative anonymity of the bazaar or the public thoroughfare.[92] It was infinitely preferable that the recruit be isolated and away from his home environment, than that the recruiter be placed in this position.

Yet the alternative, the collection of recruits by salaried officials was acceptable to neither side. Colonial planters objected that too close a government control of recruiting inevitably provoked a down-turn of supply; their agents in India—employees of the Indian government but paid by Mauritius—refused to countenance fixed wages for recruiters, on the flimsy assertion that the costs of bringing emigrants to the ports needed to be paid immediately to the suppliers; the Indian government, for its part, eschewed too close an association with the labour exporters. Its policy of official 'neutrality' alongside a covert encouragement of labour exportation avoided embarrassment at the hands of reformers and humanitarians when periodic scandals over kidnappings in India and ill-treatment in the colonies erupted in the Indian Press.[93]

The only viable solution to the supply question was for planters to adopt a mode of recruitment which could be placed more effectively under their control, but which could co-exist with the established bureaucratic apparatus at the Indian ports. The recourse to RERs ('return-emigrant-recruiters') was one result. The employment of these individuals dates from the first shiploads of 'time-expired' labourers returning to India from Mauritius in 1839.[94] By mid-century, RERs accounted for as much as 20 per cent of all arrivals.[95] Their role in the

[91] IOR, *Grierson Report*, 1882, p. 9; IOR, IPP 188/46 deposition of Mootoosamy Pillay, Madras Police Office, *PP* 1846 (691-1).

[92] *Pitcher Report*, 1882; *The Pioneer*, 7 August 1901; H. Tinker, *A New System of Slavery*, p. 127.

[93] IOR, *BEP*, 15/76-77, and vol. 432, see especially Marriott to Sec. Govt. Bengal, Nov. 61 and *CO* 167/254 Gomm-Stanley 17 July 44 (202).

[94] IOR, L/P&J/1 Vol. 88, Emig. Agent. Mauritius to Sec. Govt. FSG 24 Feb. 1843; *CCE op cit*, Evidence para 891: *PP* 1841 (43) Chapman and Brolay to Colville, Gillmore & Co., 7 March 1841.

[95] *Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners'* (*CLEC*) *Report*, 1852 appendix 42, While to Governor, British Guiana, 8 November 1950; *PP* 1859 (31-1) Protector of Immigrants' Memorandum, 18 October 1856.

recruitment process was not, however, officially acknowledged until Mauritian government emissaries to Calcutta and Madras had explicitly supported the continued use of RERs, and they were recognized as 'special agents' in new legislation which provided for engagements in India.[96]

Their uses were manifold. RERs were used to encourage new immigrants to engage at a lower wage on the plantation of their employer.[97] The RER was also a means to ensure that a planter obtained a desired number of labourers without having to entrust his requisition to the crimping machinery in India, or to compete for new arrivals at the Mauritian depot, paying interpreters and sirdars for the purpose.[98] In employing RERs planters thus sought to limit their obligations to a measurable size and to create a personal bond between recruiter and employer which obviated the need for bargaining among themselves. Finally, the RER served as a walking advertisement for emigration to Mauritius, it being often asserted that the success of migration to a particular colony was related to the apparent number and wealth of returned emigrants.[99]

The utilization of RERs also enabled the colonial government to assert that the arrival of bands at the depot, outside the purview of native recruiters, was thus a voluntary or unassisted migration, and promoted assertions that the large number of Indians returning to Mauritius was testimony to the favourable terms and conditions of indentured labour there.[100]

The advantages of using RERs who resembled their recruits in terms of origin and background is self-evident. The dhangur Roghoonath featured in Figure 4 was himself an RER who recounted his experience thus:

I went five years ago in charge of 50 of my countrymen to the Mauritius through the house of Gillanders & Co.; our names were registered at the Calcutta police;

96 *PP* 1859 (31-1), Appendix, Oridinance 30 of 1858.

97 *PP* 1849 (280) Reports on *Fyzel Rohomancy* and *Minerva*, 11 August & 23 October 1848; PRO *CO* 167/304 Report on *Emma Colvin*, 20 November 1848; *Royal Commissioner's Report*, 1870, p. 88.

98 P. of I. Memo 18 October 1856, *op. cit.*, *Land and Emigration Commissioners Report*, 1859, p. 47.

99 Grierson Report, *op. cit.*, PRO, *CO* 167/335 Protector of Immigrants notice, 28 November 1851.

100 *BEP* 15/75 Emig. Agent to Sec. Govt. Bengal 17 November 1860; *CO* 167/322 Governor to Secretary of State, despatch 118.

Ramanath, sirdar, of my caste, wrote to me telling me the terms of service at the Mauritius; I brought away the 50 men; . . . I am now old; I may send others but probably will not go myself.[101]

It was a masterful stroke to create collaborators from within the ranks of the coolie migrants, and crucial to the continued effective supply of labour. The crudeness of *arkati* methods and the naked alliance between *duffadar* and merchant were replaced by subtler tactics, but for the migrant such changes were merely cosmetic. From the local recruiter, paying himself out of the 'wage advance' offered by the planter to the migrant, to a system whereby an RER could pocket a commission for inducing Indians to engage at less than their market value, the degree of exploitation was unchanged. With the adoption of return-emigrant recruiting, therefore, the system was stabilized by transferring the onus of its reproduction onto those who had best survived the upheaval of the indenture process.

These shifts in recruitment strategy did not simply reflect a need to lower costs and to establish a link of the dependency which reached from the village in India to the plantation in Mauritius. RERs were also brought in to combat and overcome forces hostile to, or obstructive of, colonial emigration. The directly coercive methods—abduction and kidnapping or illegal confinement—characteristic of the early unregulated phase of migration (1834-41) were rendered more problematic by the twin forces of government intervention and local opposition. Hostility to recruiters was a constant complaint of emigration agents during the nineteenth century, and was variously attributed to zamindari or local capitalists' obstruction of recruiters, or to the local population's 'irrational' fear of overseas migration. RERs, by contrast, could be passed off as examples of persons who had succeeded in the colonies, returning with large sums of money and declaring their preference to re-emigrate rather than to settle in India. Some undoubtedly did play a useful role as disseminators of information regarding the whereabouts of kin or the advantages of a particular location. Some were bona fide return migrants taking their families with them back to Mauritius. Others took advantage of large bounties to lure labourers and wives of departed migrants to an uncertain fate, with little assurance that they would even arrive in the colony to which their relatives had been taken. In shifting the *modus operandi* of recruiting from the ports to the regions

101 *PP* 1841 (427) *op. cit.*, p. 53.

of origin of the RERs, the continuity of migrants was established, and the exploitative features of labour mobilization could be given renewed scope.

Economic and social transformations in nineteenth century India thus played an important part in determining the availability on a large scale of landless and unemployed or alienated men and women for colonial migration. These factors complemented a recruitment strategy which, initiated by planters and operated by ex-migrants, controlled temporal and spatial features of the migration with a complex array of coercive and persuasive tactics. As a result, indentured labour did not spring from poverty unaided, and emigration contracts did not, in general, reflect an agreement drawn up by equal and consenting parties. The over-arching explanation for migration cannot be sought from the migrant's own experience. One author, Brij V. Lal, argues that recruits were not simply 'helpless victims of external forces', but represented in many cases geographically mobile, voluntary migrants, seeking—and often obtaining—a better life, in the colony of their choice.[102] Contrary to these assertions, the evidence from central India and Mauritius suggests that mobility was not an indicator of willingness to undertake overseas labour; it was instead often a sign of vulnerability or marginalization. Indentured recruitment did not liberate migrants from exploitative relationships—it merely replaced one mode of appropriation with another.[103]

CONCLUSION

Capitalist penetration is often asserted to have integrated third world economies into wider systemic wholes with very little explanation of how this was actually achieved. A growth in economic activity and the impact on local power-holders can then all too readily be assumed, with no real evidence of change in production relations. In Guy Standing's study of 'migration and modes of exploitation', for example, we are glibly assured that 'under feudalism' the State was non-interventionist and labour was immobile, whilst the capitalist State is described as

[102] B.V. Lal, 'Approaches to the Study of Indian Indentured Emigration with Special Reference to Fiji', *Journal of Pacific History*, xv, Nos. 1-2 (1980).

[103] For a further discussion of the points raised in this section see M. Carter, 'Indentured Migration to Mauritius', *op. cit.*, Chapter 2 ff.

interventionist, and labour, by virtue of its commoditization, as invariably mobile.[104]

However, in the study of third world economies such simplistic dualistic schemata bear little fruit. 'Under feudalism' in India local power-holders—malguzars, zamindars, jagirdars and the like—could be far more tightly knit into the structure of the State than Eurocentric models allow. Conversely, the activities of indigenous and European capitalists in the sub-continent could quite often go against the overall interests of the colonial State with which, it is generally assumed, they are likely to have enjoyed a relationship of relative symbiosis. The East India Company itself more often played the role of mercantile entrepreneur than high-watchman or guarantor of bourgeois capitalist interests.

In the study of labour migration similar paradoxes emerge. In many circumstances labour was relatively free and mobile in pre-colonial times, and rather than liberating the labourer, colonial policies of taxation and economic regulation tended to crib and confine the peasantry and direct them toward far more specific and limiting forms of enterprise: usually the production of taxable cash crops for the purpose of export. In the process, striking disparities emerged, not simply between the rural and the urban, but on the regional scale, in the development of India's economy.

One of the earliest groups to feel the impact of colonial policies were the tribals, particularly those of central India, many of whom were reduced in a short space of time to the level of migrant proletarians. In the 1860s and 1870s the tribals of Chota Nagpur began to be drawn off in increasing numbers to the tea plantations of Assam. At the turn of the century they were then joined by growing numbers of marginalized cultivators and tribals from Mahakoshal. Parallel to this, migrant labourers were employed in growing numbers in agriculture in Punjab, Khandesh, Berar, the Narmada valley and Gujarat. Invariably these migrations were coerced either at their point of origin, or in the methods of their recruitment, or both, In the shorter-distance seasonal work in the mines, sugarcane tracts and cotton fields, marginalized Hindu cultivators often predominated, whilst in the longer-distance migrations to Assam and overseas the tribals were found in greater numbers.[105] This

[104] G. Standing, 'Migration and Modes of Exploitation: Social Origins of Immobility and Mobility', *JPS*, 8, 2.

[105] P. Mohapatra, 'Coolies and Colliers', *op. cit.*.

testifies to the fact that the tribal was usually the most heavily exploited of all the migrants.

At one level, therefore, it is impossible to accept voluntaristic explanations of capitalist development in the colonial system. Cases such as those of Mussamat Singaria of Mandla and of Subboo of Hazaribag show that even when the decision to migrate was of itself a notionally 'free' one, the situations, conditions and knowledge from which it arose were invariably limited and constrained. The notion that the development of capitalist relations of production saw anything like the growth of a free market in labour is therefore seriously flawed. However, it was the ideal of the labour contract freely entered into that helped to keep the migrations going. And both within the labour force and amongst the recruiters there was often an extensive network of collaborators who in material terms were genuinely benefitted. It was this elite which gave the system of indentured migration, in particular, its *modus operandi* and its justification.

Whether ultimately, in the long run, these migrations furthered the development of capitalism in all or even a majority of the regions concerned is more difficult to say. When times were hard sugar capitalists frequently found imported plantation labour far too costly and fell back on the extraction of surplus production from dependent peasantries. The UP sugar capitalists gave up plantation production in the 1830s for this reason, and both Fiji and Mauritius switched over to dependent peasant production in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as the price of sugar declined. This may even have meant a fall in the rate of exploitation for the producers concerned, although whether this was in the long-term interests of development is another matter.

Distant sourcing also kept down the costs of labour for the industrialists of Calcutta, but in the long-term, as Lalita Chakravarty has argued, this may have stymied the rate of skill formation and inhibited productive investment. The same was true in some of the areas of rapid agricultural growth (such as the Narmada valley) which relied excessively on the input of cheap migrant labour.[106]

Finally, from the point of view of the rural labourer, migration could have ambivalent effects. The ideal basis for a system of circular migration (from the employer's point of view) was a stable and not

[106] L. Chakravarty, 'Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force . . . ', *op. cit.*, Crispin Bates, 'Class and Economic Change in Central India: the Narmada Valley, 1820-1930', *op. cit.*.

excessively impoverished rural base, which could guarantee a regular contribution to the reproduction costs of labour. Unfortunately these conditions were not often met-except possibly in the case of some circular migrants heading from the rural areas of Maharashtra to Bombay.[107] The tribal areas of Mahakoshal and Chota Nagpur, for example, soon began to diminish as potential sources of heavy recruitment, caught as they were between the pincers of Hindu settlement and colonial taxation. The very fact of emigration, and the loss of large numbers of able-bodied workers, could then itself precipitate a cycle of degeneration in agriculture and rural industry.

On the other hand, migrants themselves were not always ignorant of the costs and benefits. The infinite fragmentation of the labour market, and the social institutions of jobbers, caste and language affiliations that accompanied it, could also often afford the most unskilled of workers and their families an entry into employment and a means of resisting the erosion of wage levels.[108] If only a 'sharing of poverty', migration could thus sometimes still be the best guarantee of survival. Nonetheless, the sources we have cited point to the all too obvious dangers of analysing migration without reference to the environment within which it arose. Moreover, an analysis of the process and, in particular, the moment of recruitment, at which structural condition and the promise of betterment presented the would-be migrant with a practical choice, shows that for the majority the recourse to migration, whether of short or long distance or duration, represented not a means to a better life but simply a more comprehensive system of exploitation.

[107] See R. Chandavarkar, 'Workers' Politics in the Mill Districts of Bombay, *Modern Asian Studies*, 15, 3, (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 603-47.

[108] See J. Breman, 'A Dualistic Labour System? A Critique of the Informal Sector Concept', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Bombay, 4 and 11 December 1976.